

THE MULTIPLE MEDIA OF TEXTS

How onscreen and paper texts
incorporate words, images, and other media

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PREVIEW

Every day we encounter texts that hold together words, drawings, colors, charts, photographs, animations, sound, video, and so on; sometimes these texts are a single page or screen, and sometimes we have to navigate through many pages or screens to gain sense of what the texts' creators hope to achieve. This chapter offers a rhetorical approach (using both textual and contextual analysis, as Jack Selzer describes in his chapter on rhetorical analysis) for analyzing texts made up of multiple media, tied primarily to the visual presentations of pages and screens. The chapter raises questions about relations among the visual/material presentations of our texts and particular values of our time and place, such as efficiency, clarity, consumption, and standardization—and the “seriousness” of words and the non-seriousness of images—as a way of contextualizing the analysis and composing of texts that use different visual strategies.

BASIC CONCEPTS

ASSUMPTIONS underlying the arguments of this chapter

The visual presentation of a page or screen gives you an immediate sense of its genre.

When you see 8½" by 11" white pages with double-spaced type, you probably see the pages, without having to think about it, as a “school paper” or “unpublished manuscript”; printed academic books are usually printed on smaller sized sheets, and with lines of type that are closer than double-spaced. When you see a large page with brightly-colored drawings, you probably think “children’s book.” Think of how—without having to study it—you know whether a webpage has been designed to sell you something or present you with news.

When you first look at a page or screen, you initially understand its functions and purposes because it follows the visual conventions of a genre.

All page- and screen-based texts are (therefore) visual and their visual elements and arrangements can be analyzed.

Some texts, such as academic texts, try to ‘hide’ their visibility in order to meet a reader’s expectations: a reader of these pages is not supposed to be aware of the layout of a page or the typefaces used. Think about how strange an academic page would look were its lines of type not straight, were it to contain many colors and typefaces, or were it not to have page-numbering. Precisely because you come to an academic page bringing expectations

about how that page should look means that the page has had to be visually designed to fit your expectations. This doesn't necessarily mean that the design has been much attended by the designer: when you write a paper for a class, for example, you probably do not consider the size of paper you will use or how to indent your paragraphs; instead, you use whatever paper is in the printer and you follow the page-layout conventions for margins and headers and paragraph indentation and page-numbering you were taught in high-school English or a first-year writing class or handbook.

Meanwhile, we expect other texts—comic books, children's books, web pages—to highlight or even celebrate their visuality, using multiple typefaces and many colors and different kinds of images and visual arrangements.

That we associate particular visual arrangements with different genres of writing means that the visual arrangements do some of the work of the genre. This means, then, that the visual arrangements can be analyzed in terms of the genre work they do. We can ask, then, (for example) why the visual presentation of an academic or literary page is generally supposed to efface itself or how it is that we have come to expect 'professional looking' webpages not to look like plain white double-spaced paper pages.

The visual elements and arrangements of a text perform persuasive work.

Someone designing a logo for a company considers very carefully how the color and shape and images in the logo will persuade those who see the logo to think of the company. A designer hopes, for example, that using a mountain in a logo for an insurance company will suggest that the company is solid and reliable but also big and likely to be around for a long time.

A writer constructing a logical argument on paper might break her text into four sections that have numbered headers. The visual presentation of the headers signal to a reader that these sections contain the four most important points of the argument; on the page, they construct the logical arrangement of the argument for the reader.

Attitudes toward the visual aspects of texts change over time.

Think of illuminated manuscript pages of the Middle Ages, where one person would spend months hand-lettering the pages and another person would spend months painting elaborate illustrations in the margins and illuminating the letters that began each chapter. The amount of time spent on these pages was a result of the technologies of the time as well as a result of societal structures in which only the very rich could pay for the lengthy time of hand production—but the amount of time spent on these pages was also a result of the educated believing that the visual presentations of pages were to make for a reading process where readers moved slowly through pages, contemplating the words and paintings and using the visual presentation of the pages as an aid to memory.

In our century, reading is different. We often place value on the quick and efficient transmission of information. In many of our texts—textbooks as well as fix-it manuals—we expect layouts that help us get to what we need with no distraction or slowing down.

But reading in our time is changing. Computer-based technologies of communication have been designed so as to make possible new texts—such as webpages, e-mail, interactive multimedia, MOOs and MUDs¹—which are being shaped by computer scientists, hackers, students, and interface

designers as well as by those in book publishing and academia. Desktop publishing allows writers more visual control over their own texts than the structures of book publishing have. These various technologies offer perspectives for considering and changing the approaches we have inherited to composing and interpreting pages: What kinds of new arguments are possible (for example) if writers of academic pages take more responsibility in choosing the visual presentations of their arguments? What sorts of relationships can writers establish with readers through different visual presentations? Is it appropriate to speak of ‘writers’ and ‘readers’ when writers are doing more visual layout and readers are interpreting texts that require other kinds of actions than decoding letter- and word-shapes?

The visual aspects of text are (therefore) to be understood not simply in terms of physiology but also in terms of social context.

The size of our hands certainly has something to do with the size of our books, for example, and our eyes’ abilities to distinguish fine detail certainly have something to do with the appearance of type on a page. But reasons for the size of our books and the typefaces we use, as with other visual aspects of our texts, are also tied to other, social, practices.

When books were rested on lecterns so that someone could read aloud while others worked (which was the practice in the scriptoria of medieval monasteries), the books tended to be larger and considerably heavier than the ones we carry now.

Typefaces have also varied widely over time. At the beginning of the Renaissance, for example, most books in Europe were lettered in what we now call **blackletter** typefaces, which were relatively new; self-consciously, the Italian Humanists wanted their books to look classical rather than modern, and so they studied Imperial Roman inscriptions and designed typefaces emulating the shapes of those inscriptions. It took several centuries for these Roman typefaces (the predecessors to Times New Roman or other typefaces with “Roman” in their names) to catch on across Europe, but printers—and scholarly readers—used these new typefaces to signal their attachments to the classical: these typefaces were originally designed to call attention to themselves on a page. Now, however, designers use these typefaces precisely because they no longer stand out; through practice and use these faces have become familiar and ‘invisible.’ **If the Humanists had not desired to re-create what had disappeared from European pages, our pages now might be printed in type like this — and you would (probably) have no trouble reading it.**

In doing analysis of the visual aspects of pages and screens, then, we need to keep in mind the social circumstances in which a text is composed and into which its author or authors hope it will fit and do its work.

Composing a visual text (thus) involves choosing strategies for shaping what is on a page or screen to direct a reader/viewer/browser’s attentions, within the context of other texts.

Someone composing a text that has visual materiality has to pick and choose among available strategies to build a text that attracts a desired audience, is understandable to that audience, and moves it toward the ends desired by the composer. What (for example) should a reader notice first on a page, and what second? What mood should the text create?

CATEGORIES & TERMINOLOGY to use in analysis

Here is one possible way to categorize what we see when we look at a text.

- THE PAGE OR SCREEN ITSELF.
- WHAT IS ON A PAGE OR SCREEN.
- WHAT HELPS READERS MAKE CONNECTIONS AMONG THE PARTS OF A MULTI-PAGED OR MULTI-SCREENED TEXT.
- WHAT “CONTAINS” THE PAGE/SCREEN.

Three of these categories are explicated in the Approach section below. The second category—WHAT IS ON A PAGE OR SCREEN—requires terminology with which you might not be familiar, so it is unpacked here.

• WHAT IS ON A PAGE OR SCREEN: **TYPE**

When a letter or word or sentence or paragraph is placed on a page or screen, it is given visual materiality and hence must be given a particular *lettershape, style, size, and overall shape*.

Lettershapes: typefaces

Letters have shape because of their typefaces. Because typefaces are a major visual strategy for a text’s composers to signal the genre into which the text is to fit, and because the choice of different typefaces can signal argumentative moves in a text, it is worth giving typefaces—their categories and histories—some attention.

One possible first step in categorizing a typeface is to ask whether it is most often used in short, quickly-read phrases—such as in headers or in advertising catchlines—or in longer blocks or paragraphs for more engaged reading. In the practices we have inherited, designers use the first category when they want a typeface to call attention to itself on the page; designers use the second category when the typeface is supposed to attract no attention to itself. The first category is often named **DECORATIVE** (although such typefaces function in ways other than decorative); the second, **FOR EXTENDED READING**. Here is a further breakdown of the two categories (and notice that some typefaces could be placed in more than one category):

DECORATIVE TYPEFACES

Script typefaces

These look as though they were drawn by hand with (a more or less controlled) pen. Examples: *Avalon, Caflisch, Gezanne, Erik, Ex Ponto, Monoline Script, Nuptial, Soda Script*

Novelty faces

Examples: *ALMONTE SNOW, DIAMONDS IN THE SKY, KARLOFF*

Blackletter or gothic

Examples: *Notre Dame, Formal Text hand*

Grunge or Postmodern

Examples: *Acidic, Contrivance, Crud, DYSPLASIA, fragile, Not A Solo*

Typefaces attached to a particular arts movement or person

Examples: **Alphonse Mucha**, **ART AND CRAFTS**, *Isadora*

Other decorative faces

Examples: **FAIR LETTERS**, **BERMUDA SQUIGGLE**, **BUDMO JIGGLER**, **Comic Sans**, **Journal**

TYPEFACES FOR EXTENDED READING

Roman typefaces

As described on the previous page, these faces have their origins in the desire of the Renaissance Humanists to give their writing classical weight.

These typefaces are to look as though drawn with quill and ink, and have lines—called *serifs*—at the end of the main strokes; serifs are supposed to look like the finishing touches a stone carver would give to a letter to clean up its edges. Examples: Garamond, Minion, Baskerville, Times New Roman



Modern typefaces

These are typefaces that were modern when they were first designed, in the 18th century. Type designers wanted new typefaces to reflect the rationality of the Enlightenment, and new printing technologies allowed them to design faces using very thin strokes. Examples: Bodoni, Ellington, Fenice

Slab serif or Egyptian typefaces

When Napoleon set out to conquer Egypt as the 18th century turned into the 19th, he sent artists and historians as well as the army; although the army ended up surrendering to Britain, the artists and historians brought samples of Egyptian art to France, starting a craze for all things Egyptian, including typefaces that looked Egyptian. In the typefaces that have grown out of the original designs, there are no curving transitions into the serifs. Unlike the two previous categories of serified faces, slab serif faces generally have strokes that are all the same weight. Examples: Caecilia, Courier

Sans serif typefaces

Type designers, in tune to the industrialization of Europe and the United States in the latter half of the 19th and into the early 20th century, wanted typefaces that functioned rationally, like machines. They streamlined the typefaces with which they had grown up, removing everything they saw as extraneous, such as serifs. (“Sans” is French for “without.”) Examples: Avant Garde, Futura, Helvetica

NOTE how most academic and literary texts use only one or two typefaces throughout, although there are writers experimenting with the argumentative possibilities of mixing multiple typefaces, as one of the examples for analysis shows.

NOTE also that, although I have divided all typefaces into two large

categories based on function, these categories grow out of social use and practice. As practices change, these typefaces can take on different functions and new typefaces appear.

Styles of type

The typefaces I have categorized “for reading” can have different styles attached to them. Designers use these styles for different purposes: when applied to only a few words or lines, they call visual and hence conceptual attention to words or phrases; they can mark text that is supposed to represent spoken words.

This **Garamond** typeface, for example, has regular, *italic*, **semibold**, *semibold italic*, **bold**, and **bold italic** styles. When working with texts that are to have a harmonious appearance, designers often choose a typeface family with multiple styles, such as the Garamond, because the lettershapes of the different styles derive from each other, giving the styles a unified—and hence harmonious—appearance.

The size of type

What do you think when you see type this size?

The different genres of pages we see have different sizes—and mixes of sizes—associated with them. This page is (mostly) set in a size you expect to see in an academic text. Children’s books often have very large faces, which are then scaled down somewhat for young adult books, which are then scaled down again for adult texts. How do you think these size conventions developed?

NOTE how most academic or literary texts, on paper or screen, use the same size of type throughout, although—as with mixing typefaces on a page—some writers are experimenting with the argumentative possibilities of widely varying sizes, on paper and on the web.

The overall shape of type

The shape of type on a page—or screen—can suggest many things to us; compare, for example, these samples:



Do these layouts suggest different kinds of texts? How difficult do you judge the texts to be, based on the overall shape of the type? (The first and third pages have what is called “left alignment”; the middle page

has “fully justified alignment.”)

Early Greek and Roman papyrus scrolls do not have lower- and uppercase letters, and most often do not have spaces between words or contain the blocks of type we now call ‘paragraphs’; these features of type on pages (and now on screens) came to be over many centuries, often accidentally. (The indented paragraph, for example, may have come to be when, in the early days of the printing press, printers would leave a space at the beginning of text blocks for painters to add the large capital letters we associate with early texts; in the rush to get books to market, printers often never got books to the painters, and soon readers came to expect the open—indented—space at the beginning of each block of text.)

Because we have come to associate different kinds of texts—and different kinds of appropriateness—with different shapes of type on a page (and hence on a screen), page composers can arrange the shape of text to achieve different ends.

- **WHAT IS ON A PAGE OR SCREEN:
OTHER VISUAL ELEMENTS**

In addition to type, page and screen composers can make their arguments with *shapes, color, photographs, drawings and paintings, charts and graphs, animations, visual transitions, video, and sound.*

Shapes

Look how the authors of this web page have used solid-colored shapes not only to differentiate what is clickable or background information from what is ‘content,’ but also how the shapes—rectangles with curved edges, like a 1950’s car fin—signal that this site is supposed to appeal to those who think such techno-nostalgia is hip.



Think also of what the shape of a bullet in text can signal:

- It can be as visually unobtrusive as possible but still perform its function of indicating a point.
- It can echo the overall shape of text on a page or screen, emphasizing the geometric organization and order of a text.
- ☛ It can suggest another time period or the physical presence of an author.

Color

You've grown up with and into uses of color, and can probably easily describe the colors that would most likely be used in children's books or a website promoting health through relaxation—as long as the book or website was designed and intended to be read in your country.

NOTE, however, that color uses you take for granted do not carry across cultural lines: in China, for example, the traditional color of a bride's clothing was scarlet and the color of mourning was white.

NOTE also that, when you are analyzing a text, the amount of color is something to note alongside what colors are used. You do not generally expect to see anything but black and white in academic or literary paper-based texts, except on the covers of books. Websites that want to give the appearance of being serious tend to use muted colors and a limited number.

In addition, consider the range of black through grey to white as a range of colors. Some typefaces form blocks that are very dark, and some light, in overall tone. Some pages or screens are designed to present a very evenly toned surface (like the pages in this book, for the most part) while others use different typefaces and other graphic elements to create a variable surface that can look playful or create a sense of geometric order.

Photographs

You are probably well able to look at advertisements in magazines to analyze why a model in a photograph is (for example) white, female, slender, tall, healthy-looking, and gazing at a product she holds at chest-level.

You can probably also say why in this advertisement for netaid.org, a “partnership” between software companies and the United Nations Development Program for addressing world poverty, the designers chose to show a child, and why the child is centered and large and sleeping on piles of clothing and blankets while other people mill in the background, and why the child's arm reaches out as it does, down toward and off the bottom of the



page. You can probably also say why the button—as on a computer screen—is labeled “Save” and placed where it is. Finally, you might also be confident in discussing not only economic reasons why this composition’s photograph is black and white (because black and white is cheaper to reproduce than color), but also how this photograph calls to contexts of traditional black and white documentary photography.

Each of these aspects of photographs—as they are used in various compositions—involves choices made by composers for achieving persuasive ends.

NOTE that photographs are often used to bring an sense of immediacy and “reality” to a layout—but photographs can also be fading black-and-white presentations from other times, and they can be manipulated to look old or dreamy or super-saturated.

Photographs can also be manipulated in other ways: pyramids can be moved to emphasize what an author/designer wants (as happened recently with a National Geographic cover), a model’s face can be made completely and unhumanly blemish free, or people who would or could never be in the same room can be seamlessly aligned.

Photographs have never been ‘caught moments of reality’ (they have always been the result of a photographer’s attentions, choice of framing, and technological knowledge), but because of changes in technology photographers now have many more choices available to them for constructing their work.

NOTE how easy it is to focus almost exclusively on the photograph(s) when you analyze a text composed mostly of photograph and type. Be sure to attend to how the photograph(s) and the type have been designed to interact, and how the typeface, its size, and alignment also work in the whole layout.

Drawings and Paintings

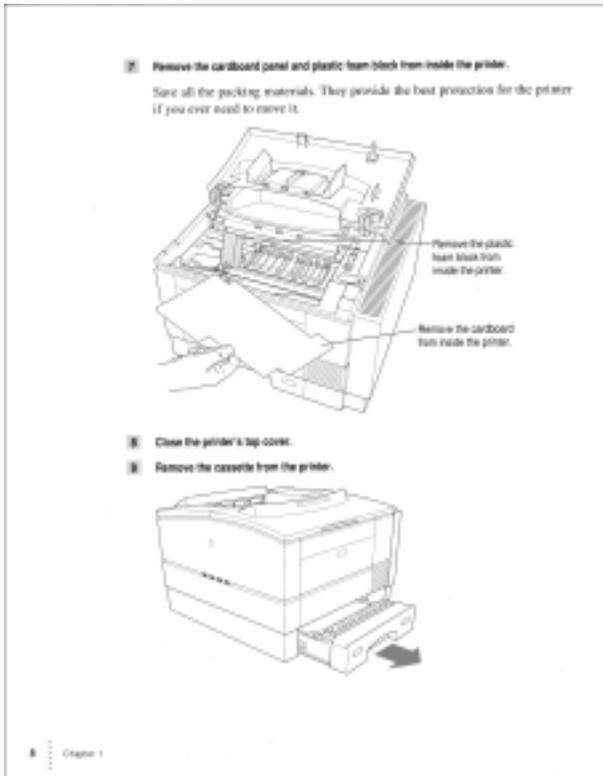
A drawing or painting—an illustration that is not supposed to look as though it were made with a camera—can look quickly sketched or minutely observed; it can be a technical illustration that seems never to have been touched by a hand; it can be the central focus of a page or a background pattern.

The appearance of an illustration is a composer’s choice—as is whether to use an illustration or a textual description in a text.

In the screen at the top of the next page, from a multimedia CD-ROM about the Beat Generation, the central illustration—the parts of which can be clicked to learn about movies or music or writing of the time—suggests what a living space from that time could have looked like, but it is also a hard-edged though loose sketch in a limited range of dark colors. The illustration provides a darkly playful frame for looking at the work of the Beats. Imagine, also, how different your experience of this piece would be if this screen were simply a list of words to click—Movies, Texts, Recordings, Art, Pornography—rather than an illustration where to see excerpts from films made by the Beats you click the Super-8 projector in the illustration.



On the page below, notice how the composers use technical illustrations rather than words or photographs to demonstrate a process:



Such illustrations allow a page's composer to present objects more abstractly than in photographs, and so to present only what in an object is relevant to the purposes of the page. Notice here, though, how hands are part of the drawing, to lessen any potential coldness that can accompany technical illustrations; the illustrations are also softened—and hence the instructions made more inviting—by the use of gray shading.

Charts and graphs

Charts and graphs are sometimes referred to as “data visualizations,” which indicates how—when they are used on a page or screen—they are intended to bring a scientific or technical tone to a text.

There is no one chart or graph that perfectly represents or encapsulates a dataset: any chart or graph is the result of its maker's decisions about what data to foreground and what not. Someone designing a chart or graph also has to decide what kind of chart or graph (scatterplot vs. pie chart, for example), what typefaces and colors to use, the weights of lines, and whether to include illustrations (as in the charts and graphs of *USA Today*).

Charts and graphs thus function rhetorically as part of a page or screen but also in and of themselves.

• **WHAT IS ON A SCREEN: VIDEO, ANIMATION, VISUAL TRANSITIONS, & SOUND**

Video

Video can be edgily hand-held or steadily formal. The current but always-being-stretched technical limitations of the Web and desktop computers have restricted video on our screens to small windows and jumpy frames; with the proliferation of digital video cameras and the expansion of computer power we will probably have more, larger, and smoother video to watch and analyze on screen.

In CD-ROM based multimedia applications, video can be shown through masks of any shape and not just in rectangular windows. A video sequence can thus be smoothly integrated into a scene, making it look as though parts of the screen “come alive.”

When you analyze video, keep in mind the range of choices a videographer has: framing, lighting, color or black and white, visual transition between sequences, use of type or titles, if there are actors and whether those actors address the camera or not, and so on. Each frame and sequence contributes to the overall effect of a video, and so require choice.

Animation

Like drawings and paintings and video, animations can be presented in many ways: there are the bright colors and broad shapes we associate with children's TV cartoons or many Disney films, and there are finely rendered 3D animations of dinosaurs woven into ‘live’ footage to seem as though we are transported in time. Animations are often used in explanations of technical processes because the processes can be shown abstractly, with direct focus on the important details. The technological capabilities of the Web and various software

packages are also encouraging many people to experiment with animations inspired by poetic structures (and sometimes by the practices of experimental film), mixing type, color, drawings, photographs, and movement.

As with all these graphic elements, a composer not only decides that an animation is appropriate to her ends but also decides what kind of animation, its colors, and so on.

Visual Transition

At present, when you click a regular link on most web pages, the current page disappears from screen to be replaced, bit-by-bit, by a new page; this is close to a jump cut in video or film. Certain software allows developers to incorporate visual transitions in onscreen files; most software for developing CD-ROM based multimedia applications gives developers choices for how one screen will change into the next.

A dissolve between two screens, for example, can make it look as though what is on one screen morphs slowly into what is on the other, implying a relation of similarity between the screens. A push transition can make it look as though you are seeing one long page moving behind the onscreen window, as though what is on the two pages is in one, united, place.

Because transitions establish visual relationships between different screens, they are important choices for composers—and analysts—to consider in arguments.

Sound

There is no small speaker embedded in this page to suggest how hip-hop or Bach playing while you read affects your sense of my arguments—but you ought to be able to imagine the differences.

Sound on screen can be a voiceover, repeating or expanding upon what is onscreen. Designers choose this strategy sometimes for educational reasons—helping children with difficult words or supplying additional modes of presentation for those who learn in different ways—and sometimes for commercial ends, enthusiastically pitching a product.

Sound can also be ambient, suggesting a mood or place. This strategy can make a text seem more present and real because it encourages us to experience the text similarly to how we experience our day-to-day actions in spaces where sound and movement (and smell) are mixed.

Try watching MTV without the music to hone your sense of what sound and visual strategies bring to texts together and separately.

AN APPROACH FOR ANALYZING the visual aspects of texts

In this section I list and discuss questions for considering how the visual elements and contexts of a text contribute to our overall experience of the text. The questions are not exhaustive of what we can ask of the visual elements of a text, certainly, but they provide an initial framework that can be modified and expanded; these questions ask us to:

- 1 Name the visual elements in a text.
- 2 Name the designed relationships among those elements.
- 3 Consider how the elements and relations connect with different audiences, contexts, and arguments.

The questions thus help us define the objects of analysis and they encourage preliminary interpretations of what we see.

Below are the questions, tied to the categories I named above; the Analysis section that follows shows how the kinds of observations generated by these questions can be connected and composed into interpretation.

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AT A SCREEN OR PAGE ITSELF

- *Naming the elements:* What is the size of this page/screen? What is its shape? Its texture? How is it colored?
- *Naming relationships among elements:* Do the visual elements on the page look small and centered and swallowed up by the page, or do they take over the whole page? Does the shape of words on the page fit and echo the shape of the page, or suggest geometric order, or is there incongruence? Is the page/screen designed so that you are not supposed to notice it but only the elements on it?
- *Contextualizing the elements:* How would your experience of this page/screen be different if it were a different size or shape or color or texture? What does this tell you about the expectations about the visual you bring to this text, expectations of which the author/designer is taking advantage?

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AT WHAT IS ON A SINGLE PAGE/SCREEN

- *Naming the elements:* What are the visual elements of this page/screen? What kinds of typefaces have been used—or are there any visual words at all? Are there photographs, illustrations, charts or graphs? What are the sizes of the different elements? Is there color? What colors, and how much?
- *Naming relationships among elements:* How does your attention move over this page/screen, that is, what catches your eye first, what second, what third—and why? (The size and color of something, and its placement at top or left or bottom or right, or what it presents (photographs, drawings) help answer this question—although it is also important to notice when your attention is directed evenly across and down a page). This tells you the order the author/designer wants you to see and hence think about what is on the page/screen, the hierarchical relation between elements. (For example, a block of text that has been made the exact same size and shape as a photograph perhaps tells you that the photograph is just as important in this text as the block of text.)
- *Contextualizing the elements:* With what sorts of audiences do you associate the elements—and the relationships between them—you have named? How would this page/screen be different if one of its elements were different, or if elements were added/removed? (How would this page be different if the type were purple or larger or the page were twice as tall? How would this screen be different if the photograph of Barbie were replaced by GI Joe or Toni Morrison or Rosie O'Donnell? How would this screen be different if its video clip were replaced by a drawing?)

Sometimes imagining a page with a replacement or change helps us see much more clearly what the page is intended to achieve, because it helps us denaturalize the page and see its elements as choices that could have been otherwise. What do the author/designer's choices of visual strategies tell you about her/his conception of the audience for this page/screen?

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AT WHAT HELPS READERS MAKE CONNECTIONS AMONG THE PARTS OF A MULTI-PAGED OR MULTI-SCREENED TEXT.

- *Naming the elements:* What visual strategies did the designer use to tell you that these various pages or screen are to be understood as one text? (Are the pages bound together? Do the different screens/pages use similar colors or typefaces or graphical elements? Did the writer-designer compose this to look like one text?)
- *Naming relationships among elements:* How are you introduced to this text? What does the opening page or screen lead you to expect about the rest of the text?
- *Naming relationships among elements:* What tells you that this text continues on other pages or screens? How have you come to recognize this visual strategy? (That is, you have been explicitly taught that the lines of text on a book page continue on the next page or have some explanation of how they continue on a later page—but how have you learned about the workings of links on web pages? How have you learned to recognize what is clickable in texts like video games or exploratory multimedia like *Myst*?) How do the contexts of your learning affect your attitude towards these texts and their pages/screens?
- *Naming relationships among elements:* How do the acts you must take to move through this text affect your sense of the relationships among the different parts of the text? How do the visual relationships between the different pages/screens of this text contribute to your sense of the text? (When you go to the next screen of a web page by clicking a text link, what sort of relationship do you think exists between the two pages? How is this different from the relationship you imagine between successive pages of a book? How is a graphic link different from a text link? How is a vertical 'listing' of onscreen buttons/icons different from listing of words that are clickable? How is a web page that ends with multiple links different from a web or book page that offers no such set of choices?)
(How would a set of screens be different if instead of being linked by a dissolve they were linked by a wipe or scroll? What if a set of pages were stapled rather than bound, or were in a box rather than a cloth wrapping? What if a magazine article about the literacy practices of rural third-graders were opposite an ad for weight-reduction pills rather than an article about computer use in elementary schools?)
- *Contextualizing the elements:* What do your observations tell you about how the designer hoped the audience would approach and move through this text? Does the way this text has been composed for you to move through it suggest other kinds of practices? (For example, do you move through this website as though through a deck of cards, or are you supposed to feel as though you are having a conversation with someone? Do these paper pages look mass-produced or have they been designed to make you think of handwork?) What sort of relationship with the text

does the structure of this text ask its audience to have? What sort of relationship with other people?

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AT WHAT “CONTAINS” THE PAGE/SCREEN

- *Naming the elements:* If you close your eyes and ‘picture’ this text as a whole, what do you see? Is it a rectangular shape with cloth covers, or...? Is it a round shiny plastic thing in a clear plastic box with a paper wrapper? How is the cover/wrapper labeled?
- *Naming relationships among elements:* What expectations do you develop in response to the specific visual presentation of this text as a whole object? (With what is shown on its cover, or its size? With the packaging of the CD on which this piece of interactive multimedia arrived? With the window through which I am viewing this web page? With this computer?)
- *Contextualizing the elements:* With what sort of context do you associate this object and its visual appearance? What kind of people do you think will carry and use this object?

Finally...

- The questions above ask you to approach a text as a discrete object with distinct visual organization (what is on a page/screen, the page/screen itself, relations between the pages/screens, the ‘container’ for the pages/screens). Does this organization work for the text you are analyzing? What is left out of this organization, or excluded?

APPLIED ANALYSES

For the sake of space, I do not apply all the questions from the Approach section to each text I analyze below (nor do I apply them always in order), but the following analyses should give you ideas about how the questions can help you identify and relate the elements of a text so as to construct understandings of why texts have been given their particular visual arrangements.

ANALYSIS OF a page from a magazine

The page I analyze—shown on the next page—comes from the March 2000 issue of *WIRED* magazine. An issue from a previous year carried the subtitle “The Business of Change” on its cover, and the magazine’s articles cover technological developments—primarily dealing with computers and all things digital—and their economic and social connections. Because this is a magazine devoted to high tech and money, areas where being up-to-date and attentive to future possibilities are important, the pages of this magazine—advertisements and articles—are designed to persuade readers that any information they take from these pages is as close to the moment (or the coming moments) as possible. Given, however, that the business of technology is so much caught up with technological objects like computers and music appliances, the border between knowledge about technological objects and wanting those objects can be thin; the “business of change” can only continue if business—which means consumption—holds a steady course.

This analysis examines one page that I think works to create such a steady course by not only informing readers about new technologies but also by shaping desire for those technologies.



The “Fetish” page is a regular feature in recent years of *WIRED*. It shows new technological tools (and toys) that might interest the magazine’s readers. While the word-title “FETISH” is certainly an indication of the relationship the authors/designers hope readers will establish with what is on this page, the word is not the only strategy employed to encourage that relationship: the layout of the page is also very much strategized.

This page is on the right side of a two-page spread, and—like all pages in the magazine—is made of a thick, white, semigloss, smooth paper; the paper feels slick to my touch but substantial. The page is in a usual size for magazines. There are no consistent margins anywhere on the page, and the objects shown on the page fill the page and even overflow its edges.

At the top of the page is the word “FETISH,” in a blue and light green sans serif typeface; the individual letters look three-dimensional, as though constructed out of sheets of aluminum. There are photographs of three objects on the page: a pocket-size scanner (for scanning business cards or receipts), a mortar (for playing paintball), and see-through loudspeakers; the objects range in price (I learn if I read about them) from \$250 to \$3100. The three objects are shown in muted colors against the white of the page; they have been cut out from any thing that was around them so that there is nothing to distract my eyes from them. There are also three small columns of text: these columns describe the objects, give pricing and

contact information, and are in a sans serif typeface—like “FETISH”—and in a uniform small size in light blue and black ink; they do not overlap or in anyway visually interfere with my view of the objects. At the bottom of the page is the name of the magazine, the issue information, and a page number—as on most other pages of the magazine.

There is an overall balance and harmony to this page: all the elements are muted in color, and the text blocks are close in size to the photographs; there is only one kind of typeface used on this page, and most of the type is in the same size; there is a lot of white space left around all the elements, giving the page an open feeling. The photographs and columns of descriptive text are given an informal but nonetheless careful arrangement: on the left of the page are two objects, each with a column of text aligned evenly to it, creating a solid and balanced shape; to the right, centered to the left side of the page, is the third object, with its corresponding text (in turn) centrally aligned to it. The photograph of the third object, the speakers, is also sized to extend exactly to the top of the scanner and to the bottom of the mortar, so that the objects have an orderly and aligned visual relationship to each other.

Because there is a harmonious arrangement to the page’s elements, however, does not mean that some elements aren’t emphasized. Although the columns of text and the objects are roughly the same size, the text has been shaped into columns that make even, uneventful patterns, with no particular visual emphasis of style or size given them. It is the objects that have been given emphasis: they are differently shaped than the repeated even columns of type, they have been cut off from whatever “reality” surrounded them in their original photographs, and they have been made to extend off the page, so that we have to use our imaginations—bring them into our heads—to complete them. They are not shown in use, but rather stilled, objects to observe and consider—and desire.

And because there are only the objects and a few pieces of unemphasized text on this page, arranged as they are, my eyes move around the objects circularly. I see first what is at the top of the page (I have, after all, been taught to read starting at the top), and then move down the left column of objects, up and over to the right object, back to the top, and around again; notice how the objects have been arranged so that their edges and legs point into each other, keeping my eyes moving over them.

I think, then, that the visual strategies used to arrange this page are aimed at catching me up in a circle of desire: I may not have known these objects existed before I came to this page, but now I am presented with them arranged to keep my eyes on them, moving over them, seeing little else but them. The harmonious overall arrangement of the page keeps the desire from seeming irrational or out of control; instead, in the world of this magazine, to desire these objects is in order.

ANALYSIS OF an interactive multimedia piece on CD-ROM

To many, “computer game” equates with *Super Mario Brothers* or *Diablo II*, which are usually wordless but not soundless and which require players to figure out increasingly complex problems in order to advance to new and more difficult levels of play; the challenge is to keep advancing so as to end with more points than anyone else, to have found all that was hidden, or to be the last one standing.



The multimedia piece I analyze, *Eve*—by Peter Gabriel and his Real World Multimedia studios—has those baseline features: there is almost no text (although there is plenty of sound and some speaking), there are four levels of play reached by figuring out puzzles, and the challenge is to work your way to the end. But you don't "win" at *Eve*: you don't accumulate points or annihilate enemies. Instead, solving the puzzles returns you to an onscreen garden (above) that you lost at the beginning; at the end, the garden is richer, fuller, and more mature than it was. You also achieve overlapping worlds of music and art for exploration, play, and creation.

The name of the piece—*Eve*—suggests the initial, Biblical, garden state and its loss. The name is also a piece, however, with aspects of *Eve* that are unlike other computer games: as you move through *Eve*, untangling its challenges, you encounter screens where you can watch visual artists at work; you can hear various speakers—people off the street as well as geneticists, priests, social anthropologists, music therapists, and writers like Kathy Acker or artists like Orlan—who talk of the stages of human romance and attraction. In *Eve*, it is as though you, the player, through concentration, wits, and play, work through the piece's challenges to learn about creation, reproduction, and loss so that you can regain what has been lost. And so *Eve* aspires, I think, to give you a sort of heroic mythical experience: by 'playing' *Eve*, you lose the initial garden but you also—through overcoming challenges and acquiring knowledge—rebuild the garden. In the analysis that follows I suggest how the visual presentations and interactivities of *Eve* come together to give a player such experiences.

■

Eve's screens are sized for the most commonly available computer monitors. When you open the piece, it takes over the entire screen; although some other multimedia pieces allow you to see your computer's desktop behind them, *Eve* blocks all that from sight: it is as though the piece becomes your whole world. In addition, you play *Eve* as though you were in that world. For example, the main screens of the piece—of the initial garden, of that garden built over and become a sodden grey industrial site, of twisted and flattened grey nothingness after a nuclear explosion, of the regained garden—are 360° panoramas; these give you the sense of being in the place, of being able to look around and see it all. In addition, you decide where to move on screen; you are not controlling a character or asked to choose attributes as though you have to become someone else, as in some games. You work this piece as yourself.

Eve's screens have been made to look not quite real, as though you were hovering in a place that doesn't quite exist or that exists in dreams. The various screens have been built out of photographs, but the photographs have been treated to look less glossy and less hard-edged than usual, with more saturated color than usual to suggest the not-quite-real. All the screens have been given similar presentation, so that they clearly belong together and so create a sense of a unified world. This sense of a unified world is also built by the way the various puzzle screens are visually linked: these screens, to which you come as you move in and out of the panoramas I mentioned above, are visually connected through a strategy like the literary figure of synecdoche (where a part of something stands in for the whole, as when "sails" means "boats"). For example, one puzzle screen shows a country cemetery with a steeped church in the background; on screens linked to this one, the steeple of the church appears in the background for you to click, to go to the cemetery screen:



It may seem, from my description, that the screens of *Eve* are cartoon-like, as though aimed at children, but this is not at all the case; instead, the screens have a high level of visual detail that encourages close observation. And observation is required: the challenges of the piece require you to figure out what you can click or otherwise control with your mouse.

As with other games, what you are required to figure out and do—how you can interact—becomes increasingly complex. When the world is just mud, you simply click and hold the mouse down to uncover (for example) fish at the bottom of puddles. As your actions bring more and more green and other life to the screen, as the world becomes more built and humanized, you have to drag the words of a poem into proper order or adjust a radar dish so it can track a satellite. What appears on screen, then, and your actions, give the sense of a world become more complex, a world shaped and working by human convention.

As you continue working with *Eve*, then, it is your actions that cause both the blooming of the initial garden and its eventual over-crusting with buildings. If you become caught up in the ever more complex challenges, it is your actions that lead to a grey industrial-wasteland world and eventual nuclear annihilation—but then it is also your actions, your continued puzzle-solving and interactions with art and music and listening to various thinkers, that lead to the garden being reestablished.

In the visual structures and interactions of *Eve*, then, there are arguments about the role of human action and thought in shaping the world. There is also, perhaps, a kind of learning-by-doing-and-interacting that is very different from learning by book-reading. A reader might question the profundity of the presentation and play, but might also see possibilities—in this sort of interactive visual work—for different kinds of learning and different kinds of arguments than are usually possible on a page.

ANALYSIS OF pages from books



The page to the left could be in almost any academic journal or book. The page uses one typeface—an oldstyle—in a single size, in even black lines that, interspersed with the spaces between the lines, build a grey rectangle on the page. All this book's pages look the same, and were you to hold this page up to a light, you would see how the text rectangle on the back aligns perfectly with the text rectangle on the side facing you. If I consider the relationship between the pages of this text, the effect is of visual sameness and evenness. Just as spelling and punctuation are consistent, so is there is no change of typeface or size or page texture to encourage my eyes to note anything particular as I move over these pages. There is nothing on these pages to encourage me to be attentive to the materiality of the pages, their context of particular time and place. Instead, what is

emphasized by this visual presentation is what is not on the page but rather what is beyond the page—the thinking, the ‘content.’

This sort of visual presentation creates, then, an unremarkable even pattern so that my reading attentions are on—or in?—immaterial thoughts which exist independently of any particular visualization. This presentation works so that I can ignore the materiality and temporality of a text in order that I might range freely and deeply in thought, as though thinking itself is unbound by time and place. What might then be the effect of the time we spend with books like this, the books that fill our libraries, the books whose pages all look, unremarkably, the same?

The visual presentation of these pages suggest that visual sameness rather than visual difference is valued. Such standardization is not limited to book pages, obviously: I think here of the aisles of evenly stacked goods in supermarkets, of cars coming off assembly lines, of the rows of desks in my elementary school classrooms. Might it be possible to argue that pages like the one I have shown here—when we connect them to the larger contexts in which we see and experience them, when we connect them to the times in which they are produced—align with industrial and educational processes that encourage standardization and evenness?

If that is possible, then if authors/designers wanted to question those other processes, and to question their connections to academic work, *would it be sensible of them*

to make a composition

that followed the visual conventions of the standard academic page?

This photograph—



—shows the final pages (before the notes) of *Hiding* by Mark C. Taylor (who teaches philosophy and religion at Williams College) in collaboration with the designers Michael Rock, Susan Sellers, and Chin-Lien Chen. These pages call attention to themselves as different from the usual academic page. There is a single sentence, in a bolded slab serif typeface much larger than what we usually find in an academic text, in a small white space—that has the rough proportions of two side-by-side 8½ by 11" pages—surrounded by bright red on a semigloss paper. Only the physical size of this book fits into usual academic possibilities.

The book's closing pages above are not the only pages that have been

designed differently from academic expectation. The book has five chapters, each of which has its own overall patterning and color scheme; one of which is printed on different paper from the rest.

The first chapter, “Skinsc(r)apes,” has black and white type on red paper printed with blurry images of diseased skin, as though the bumps and blotches of the disease were on the paper itself. In the chapter, Taylor discusses Dennis Potter’s *Singing Detective* television drama, which is about, sort of, a man who is in the hospital being treated for psoriatic arthritis who is also writing a detective novel—except that the man’s hands are so affected by his disease that he cannot write; it is unclear then where the detective novel is taking shape. Taylor writes that

Potter’s programs fold back on themselves not once but at least twice to examine questions that televisual and telephonic media raise about the relation between fact and fiction, reality and illusion, truth and appearance, history and story, and surface and depth. When read in the context of contemporary technology and media culture, The Singing Detective becomes a story about the possibility or impossibility of detection in a world where all “reality” is rapidly becoming virtual reality. (24-25)

These then are also Taylor’s concerns in the book, the relation (or even existence) of surface and depth, the possibility of anything hiding and needing us to perform detective work to find and understand it.

And so the first chapter, both in its writing and in the look of its pages, makes us look at skin, at what it covers—or doesn’t—and about what happens when we try to peel away at skins, as with detective or psychoanalytic work: there is only more skin, more layers, more clues, “but no solutions” (71).

Chapter 2, “Dermagraphics,” is printed on vellum, a thin translucent paper that allows me to see, somewhat, to what is on the pages underneath. Taylor and the designers with whom he worked lay out a history of tattoo and body decoration in this chapter, with—printed in green—illustrations and photographs of tattoos and piercings taking up the full left hand page of each spread and even columns of fully justified oldstyle type (printed in black) on the right. This chapter then moves our attentions out from the skin and diseases that seem to erupt from within to the things humans have done and now do to their skins in the hopes of making meaning—but, as all the elements of this text argue, the meaning can only come from referring to other things we have made, to other signs, not to anything hiding behind or underneath a representation.

In chapter 3, “De-Signing,” Taylor moves us out again, from skin to what we put over our skin (but which acts like another layer of skin): fashion. The chapter opens with a series of full color page spreads. These full color spreads show photographs from fashion magazines, which are overprinted with phrases like “Falling Apart at the Seams” or “Transparency.” The full color spreads are followed by pages like the one shown below, where columns of black type (in a modern typeface) make a continual fully-justified column at the top and bottom of the pages as various texts in a pale blue sans serif face run through the middle of the pages, sometimes in the expected vertical format and sometimes in a horizontal format:



The blue texts take their titles from the phrases printed over the color photographs at the chapter opening, and are made to look like fashion magazine layouts. In these blue texts Taylor spreads out his considerations of fashion, using excerpts from fashion magazines that speak about specific fashion trends to show how those trends echo and repeat ideas in other areas—philosophy, literature, architecture; for example, Taylor connects fashion that reveals the seams and linings of clothing to the intellectual habits of deconstruction. In the black text, Taylor links fashion to the overall practices of modernism, the desire to be up to date and current, as well as to intellectual habits of dichotomizing, as with the concepts of *being/becoming*, *masculine/feminine*, *profound/superficial*, and so on. As in the preceding chapters, he questions those divisions through all the strategies available to him on pages, arguing that

Through its wily de-signs, fashion conspires to extend life by perpetually engendering desire. To embrace fashion is to affirm life—“not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it.” (214; quoted words are from Nietzsche)

Chapter 4, “Ground Zero,” then takes on what might seem to be the next layer we build around ourselves, architecture. As in chapter 3, the pages in chapter 4 have two texts on them, but these two texts both continue throughout all the pages, one at the top in an oldstyle typeface printed on light green, the other at the bottom of the page, printed in a sans serif face. In both texts Taylor considers what we might consider to be the central problem for architecture, that of space; the top text considers space as something with (economic) value; the bottom text considers space in its relations to time. Occasional sentences in either text are outlined and printed in green and then linked to the other text by a line. On the penultimate page of the chapter, the two texts break in mid-sentence, and—when a reader turns the page—there is present only one text, which can be read as the ending to either of the two preceding texts, where “proliferating signs immerse us in a superficial flux that never ends.... the substance of our dreams is stripped away to expose the inescapability of time and the unavoidability of death” (266-267).



In the last pages of chapter 4, chapter 5—“Interfacing”—has been erupting from the middle of the page, which the photograph above shows: the new chapter starts on a small white page-shape in the middle of the pages of chapter 4, and grows progressively larger as the book proceeds, until chapter 5 finally fills the whole page of the book and takes over. In this final chapter, which is printed in a black oldstyle of varying sizes with various red lines and boxes and photographs and illustrations interspersed, Taylor gives a history of the notion of virtual reality, whose origins he argues develop out of questions about society and culture that are similar to those that shaped Kant’s thinking at the beginning of the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Taylor steps us through Kant and Hegel and Nietzsche, and through the development of cinema and robotics and molecular biology and neurology to lead us back to the concerns of virtual reality and postmodernity. To the matters of surface and depth, of inner and outer and proper division and boundary, Taylor now adds questions about the divisions between human and machine, biology and machine, information and biology.

As the title of the final chapter together with all the strategies of the preceding pages suggest, Taylor has been building an argument that we need to reconceive the relationships we believe exist between terms like surface and depth or real and unreal. Rather than relations of opposition, Taylor would rather we work with the notion he develops of interfaces, where boundaries are not fences or walls or barriers but are instead chancy and permeable membranes. Such a conception, he argues, not only addresses the shortcomings of much thinking of our time but also is appropriate for the situations of our time.

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The book has thus followed only a baseline of expected visual and structural academic conventions: it is a size that fits on bookstore and

office shelves, its text is primarily in fully justified columns of black oldstyle type, it contains chapters (which build out from an introductory idea), its quotations are made visually clear. But the book breaks most other academic conventions in its incorporation of multiple typefaces, chapters that do not look alike, multiple texts on a page, photographs that go underneath columns of text, different texts that end with the exact same words on a page, different kinds of paper, bright colors, and so on. In other words, the pages of this book call attention to themselves.

The pages of the book call attention to the page as a surface to be looked at and used and not as a surface that exists merely to indicate some depth of thought hidden somewhere else. The pages call attention to their construction and temporal fashionability (in their use of tattoos and virtual reality, for example). The pages call us to be attentive to surfaces and their temporality as what we have to work with, as what there is.

No matter your tendency to lean toward or away from the arguments of this book, you ought to be able to see that such arguments would be undermined had Taylor and his collaborator-designers produced a book that followed strict academic conventions. You ought to be able to see how, by breaking visual conventions, they have been able to call into question other—less visible—conventions.

ANALYSIS OF pages from a technical instruction website

People learn software differently: some are independent and confident, wanting only to play with new stuff on screen; others want handholding and guidance, not wanting to get themselves into situations they can't get out of. If you were designing web-based software instruction for someone in the latter category, how would you proceed?

You'd want, probably, to make webpages that seemed inviting but not strident, pages that would give readers confidence in the technical knowledge of the people who made the pages and confidence that those people can help readers learn, at a reasonable pace. Look at this screen, the first page for the website of “Instruction Set,” an ‘Education Solutions Provider’:



You cannot see color in this illustration, but the webpage is almost completely green, a toned-down green that to my eyes is a mix of what catalogue clothing companies call “sage” and the color of doctors’ scrubs doctors. This color use, then, suggests both the natural and the medicinal, and so the page’s green performs several functions: the audience for these pages is made comfortable—colorfully promised that what these pages deliver will not be hard-edged, coldly, and only technical—at the same time “Instruction Set” is aligned with the gently, naturally therapeutic.

Although you cannot see the color here, you can probably tell that there is not a lot of visual contrast on the screen: the elements have been lightly toned; nothing pops out or calls strong attention to itself. The element given the most visual attention is the company name, which stands out by its placement towards the top left, its size, the size of the rounded-edge white box around it, and its darkness and boldness in comparison to the other elements on screen. The company name is presented in a non-sense, straightforward but rounded sans serif typeface, with the word “Instruction” made darker than “Set.” The company’s logo, to the left, is also simple: it is two rounded shapes placed on top of each other, implying gentle circular movement or integration, almost like two cupped hands. Notice, too, how many of the shapes on this page are rounded, so that the straight edges of crisp organization are softened but not erased.

There is not much text on this page. After I see the company name, my eyes are pulled by the line coming down out of it to the paragraphs on the right; these paragraphs, in the same blue as the company name, describe what the company does and emphasize that this company “listens.” To the top right is a listing of links where it is clear I can learn more about the background of the company; to the left of the two paragraphs there is a listing of categories of educational services offered; to the bottom left I can log into online courses. With the exception of the company name, there is no piece of text on this page that does not align horizontally with another piece of text. The overall effect for me of the amount of text and the careful alignment is of careful, uncluttered order, of simplicity and a company that is to-the-point but friendly.

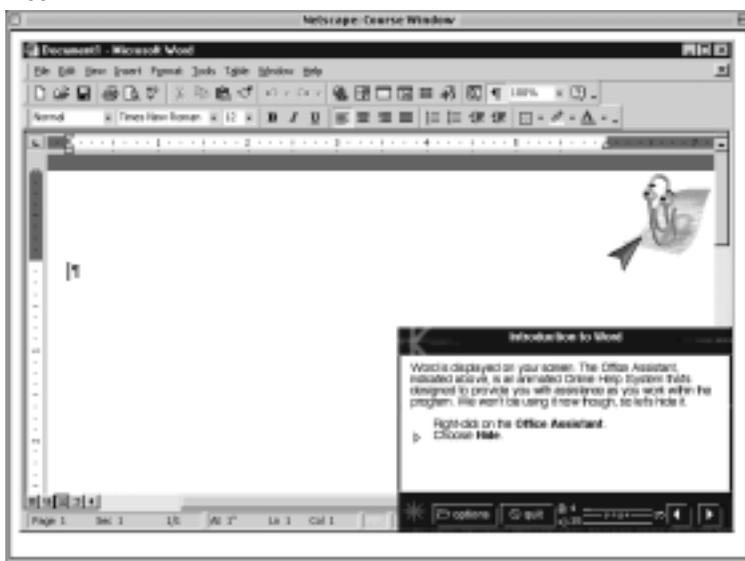
There is a piece of text I have not yet described, the company’s trademarked phrase “knowledge where you need it.” I see this phrase when my eyes follow the green line that comes out of the company name, parallels and underlines “SOLUTIONS” as it helps visually link the descriptive paragraphs and the company’s services, and then runs into the head at lower right, where the phrase is placed over the forehead. The phrase creates a visual pun, implying both that the company’s instructions are easily accessible and that the company can deliver instruction sets directly to your thinking facilities—and showing, I imagine the designers of this page hope, that the company has a sense of humor.

And then, finally, there is the face at lower right, peeking up playfully from behind the text. The face is a young man’s, whose haircut and glasses and age place him, for us in the early twenty-first century, in the world of the hip techno-geek. His expression is not hard-edged or demanding; instead, he seems relaxed and amused as he looks directly at whoever is there on the other side of the screen: he has, perhaps, the expression of someone who has just opened the door for us, peeked around to see who we are, and is about to let us in. It is unclear to me whether he is a student or a

teacher here: imagine how differently this screen would be were he replaced by the stereotyped older female English teacher or older leather-elbow-patched tweed-jacketed professorial male, or by a worried- and harried-looking administrative assistant; it might be clearer then whether he was to represent someone coming to this site to learn or the person who is to teach. Instead, because (to me) his youth suggests he is a learner but his visual alliance with the techno-geek suggests he is a teacher, his presence and position give a welcoming ambiguity to the page: perhaps I am meant to understand that there are no strict hierarchies here but that teachers and learners move comfortably together.

Every element of this page, then, works with every other to create a sense of simplicity, invitation, ease, and comfortable confidence for a potential learner—as well as a sense that there is a friendly someone there behind the screen, ready to help.

The visual, auditory, and interactive presentation of the tutorials themselves work to create similar appeal for a learner. Below is a screen from the “Introduction to Word” tutorial offered by “Instruction Set;” this screen opens in a separate window over the page where a learner has logged in to “Instruction Set” in a standard web browser window:



This screen is necessarily more complex than the opening screen, because here the company is showing, explaining, and teaching the workings of an application that has been designed to stand functionally and visually on its own. By making this tutorial appear in its own window, the designers avoid the increased visual complexity that would come if, at the top of this window, were the usual browser software’s usual row of buttons; instead, this screen is presented in the plainest window possible.

In order to differentiate instructions from the software being taught, the instructions are placed in a saturated, middle-valued blue box at lower right. Because the software being taught has been designed in primarily light grey and white, the blue of the instruction box stands out by contrast, and the box looks as though it rests on top of—separate from—

the software. Contrast in color is also used to help learners see how to step through the instructions: a bright red arrow indicates where learners are to click, type, or perform other operations. Text in the box addresses learners informally and steps them through practice with the software.

Before entering the tutorial, learners can choose to have audio; if the audio is on, learners are addressed by a cheery, not-noticeably-accented, apparently white female voice reading the instructions step-by-step, waiting for learners to perform each step before moving on. Notice, too, that the left and right arrow buttons in the instruction box allow learners to move from each set of steps to the next (or to the previous set) at their own pace; learners can thus pause over any of these screens in order to figure out what to do—but if a learner clicks the right arrow to move forward before having completed a set of steps, a dialogue box appears with the options of “Do you want to try again?” or “Do you want us to do it for you?”

All the strategies that have been used here—visual strategies of color and placement and overlap, aural strategies of (gendered, raced) voice, interactive strategies of letting learners practice using the software or being shown its operations—work to reinforce what was presented on the company’s first screen. This learning is presented as being simple and easy, taught with friendly authority. How would this screen—these instructions—be different were the instruction box bright red or hot pink, were the voice male or accented or non-white, were the instructions written with no personal address, were a learner unable to practice?

I am always helped in analyzing visual and interactive rhetoric by asking how the overall effect of piece would be change were its elements changed; imagining change helps me see more readily the effects of the original, where sometimes the various elements and their relationships seem to fit together so well as to be natural, unchosen and unstrategized. In the same way, it is useful to ask where my attentions are directed in a piece, and where not: what is made less apparent so that something else can be foregrounded? What kinds of responses or thinking are encouraged by a layout, and which made non-issues by no visual emphasis or presence?

With these screens from “Instruction Set,” I have argued that what is foregrounded are the comfort and ease a learner is to feel, as well as the gentle authority of the teachers “behind” the screen. Given the visual and interactive design of these screens, how is a learner to move beyond the comfortable hand-holding these screens offer in order to become independent and active in using the software or in learning other software? How could this software be designed so as to encourage the learner to push against the instructions in order to see what might happen if she were to make other choices, try other options?

On the interactive learning screen, my attentions are, necessarily, directed to learning specific tasks, to the instructions but also and primarily to the white space in the middle of the screen, where I learn by typing a memo. The space where I write the memo has the most contrast in light-to-dark value: I write in black on white, while all around are shades of grey and the dark blue of the instruction box; visually, as with the instructions, my attentions are directed to the center and to the writing, and not to the edges. What then can I see if I shift my focus to the edges? What options are offered, and what not? I cannot write in anything but straight lines,

although I can choose other colors for my type. I can only write on a white screen, and only as though the screen were flat, like a piece of paper; I cannot write three-dimensionally. I cannot make marginal comments. I cannot write over a line with handwritten corrections. These might seem odd observations about what is allowed here, given that the observations imply that I want to do some things almost no one does when writing. But my observations get at the shapes on the page that seem natural when we write—and there has been considerable thinking and argument in the last century about how those shapes, aligned with other cultural practices and the materiality of our communications, necessarily constrain what we can think and how we perceive and interact with others. The receding grey edges of this software show that it—like most technologies—has been designed to help me do my work easily, efficiently, and without needing to think much about the technology and its design. But what might be consequences of design that asks me to use it unquestioningly, to acquire through what I see and do the values of efficiency and transparency?

Can software—any piece of design—be shaped to question itself, to help audiences question what is hidden or backgrounded or assumed? What would screens (or pages) look like that encouraged their audiences to ponder the assumptions about work-life and worker-status that are implied (for example) in the choice of an anthropomorphized paperclip as an assistant? How could this instructional website have been designed so that its users asked why the face shown on the first screen is male rather than female, white rather than not, or so that learners asked, similarly, why it is a cheerful, unaccented (to white, middle-class people) female voice guiding them? What in this design could help learners ask about the choice to teach—as though it were the most natural use of this software—a business memo? In other words, is it possible to make designs that ask us to see and to question the cultural and economic assumptions and values guiding the designs, so that we might make designs that help us support and encourage other values if we so wanted?

Ought software—and the other screens and pages we make for each other—be designed to encourage audiences to question in these ways?

CONCLUSION: On moving from analysis to composition

To anyone wanting to compose texts employing communication modes in addition to or other than the alphabetic-on-a-page, it should be comforting to notice how reified are (in general) the existing genres for alphabet-only-on-a-page texts. To anyone believing that we see each other more generously and thoughtfully when we learn to see—as much as is possible—in unreified manners, the safe repetitions of strategies within genres can be both saddening and an invitation.

Learning to compose pages or screens that fit effectively into a reader/viewer's expectations can be, then, a matter of learning to observe well. Apply the analytic questions of this chapter to a collection of generic pages (magazine pages that advertise liquor or watches, or pages from online newspapers or one discipline's academic journals), list what you see in common, and you will see how much repetition of strategy there is. You will see some differences of composition related to particular audiences, but you will also see crisply delimited similarities in choices of color, of kind of typeface, of width of margin, of use of photograph or drawing, of alignment of elements, of placement of specific elements, of

expectation of how a reader/user/viewer will interact with the composition, and of strategies peculiar to each type of composition (notice the time on the watches in watch ads, for example). To build your own compositions can thus be a matter of looking hard at and analysing the genre that is most appropriate for your ends and then copying what you observe, modifying it to fit the particular rhetorical situation. This is not as easy as it sounds, however, because the level of detail on pages and screens is fine: it is one thing to build pages or screens that roughly match what is expected; it is quite another to build a composition that can flawlessly insert itself into the ongoing conversations and expectations to which our eyes and ears have become so subtly accustomed through long and usually undiscussed exposure. With that last sentence I do not intend to dissuade you from the attempt, but rather to interest you in the fine workings of detail and in the value of showing what you make to others and learning from their responses just how practiced our eyes and ears are at knowing what fits—or not. In addition, I have listed below resources that, although they might not describe their tasks this way, can be understood as summaries of different genre conventions for paper and onscreen texts.

But what about making visual and interactive compositions that do not so readily fit audiences' expectations, compositions that ask audiences to question, first, how they came to have their expectations and, then, the limitations and constraints of those expectations? What about making compositions that ask their audiences, in other words, to see and interact differently with texts, to consider arguments outside their usual experience? How do you persuade your readers/viewers that your composition is serious, worth reading, and, in fact, can be read? Two texts I have analyzed here—*Hiding* and *Eve*—can be problematic or overlooked by their intended audiences because they do not look or act like “serious” texts, no matter their potential value: the first violates a tremendous number of the expectations most academic readers have for how academic pages should look and behave; as for the second, few academics have, undoubtedly, ever seen it because it looks like a video game—and unlike *Hiding*, *Eve* isn't found in bookstore Philosophy sections.

If it seems valuable to you to create compositions that push against and question our expectations, then you will need to augment the list of analytic questions I have included in this chapter by questioning some specific expectations we have about how texts circulate and are consumed. You will need to question not only what happens on pages and screens and how what is on pages or screens asks readers to respond, but also how audiences come to consider certain texts as worth reading, how audiences learn and use the interpretative strategies (such as reading) that make some texts seem readily accessible and others not, and how texts are published and circulate so that we know of their existence in the first place. The pleasures of visual composition and rhetoric are many, and are of particular use when they help us see and consider how we have become and continue to be who we are.

RESOURCES for further exploration

Here are questions tied to further research you can do; below are various sources keyed to the questions.

- 1 Why do we consider texts that are composed of black letters in straight lines on white paper to be more serious than texts that contain more overtly visual elements?
- 2 How do semioticians/linguists approach the visual aspects of texts?

- 3 How do rhetoricians approach the visual aspects of texts?
- 4 How are the visual aspects of texts tied to our bodily experiences?
- 5 What other relationships have existed/exist between readers and the visual aspects of texts, between words and images?
- 6 Where can I learn more about creating visual design for page and screen?

sources, keyed to the above questions

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- 3,6 Schriver, Karen A. (1997). *Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Texts for Readers*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- 5 Smith, Keith A. (1989). *Text in the Book Format*. Rochester: Keith A. Smith Books.
- 1,5 Stafford, Barbara Maria. (1996). *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

- 6 Williams, Robin. (1994). *The Non-Designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice*. Berkeley: Peachpit.

ACTIVITIES

ANALYSIS

- 1 Go to the bookstore and to a section where you usually don't: go to the comics or graphic novel or children's section, or to math or physics, or romance or cultural studies. Find a book that attracts you: what in the visual presentation attracts you, or helps you feel confident about approaching the book? How could you apply these visual strategies in your own work?
- 2 Watch a friend move through a piece of interactive multimedia s/he has never seen before. At each new screen, ask your friend how s/he knows what to click, and why. What assumptions about the visual elements on screen is your friend making? What do you think is the origin of those assumptions?
- 3 Choose 4-5 categories of screen and/or paper-based texts (entertainment or education for small children, personal web pages, poetry, manuals for using small home appliances, regional guides, college level textbooks in economics, etc.), and then look at 8-10 examples from each category. What strategies of visual presentation unite the examples within each category? What do these similarities tell you about our expectations of the visual presentations of this kind of thinking or information? ... How are the texts visually different? How do these visual differences help the different texts appeal to different kinds of people within a larger audience?
- 4 Interview someone who designs texts for a living. Ask after the considerations that person has in mind as s/he lays out a particular kind of text. Ask both about how the person thinks about the specific text as well as about the constraints that come along with the particular kind of publishing (that is, what design considerations exist because of budget or deadline or computer-platform).

OR:

Interview someone who has written a text that was then handed over to a designer to be given its visual presentation. How did the writer respond to the text after it had been designed? Would the writer have designed the text differently? Why?

- 5 This chapter makes uneasy use of the terms *writer*, *reader*, *text*, *user*, and *designer*, because sometimes these terms don't seem to catch appropriately the actions taken by or the position of those who 'consume' and those who compose various of the texts considered in this chapter. Choose several web pages or CD-ROM pieces on a related topic, and consider how you move through the pieces, and how as a result you perceive the maker(s) of the pieces. What name (reader? interactor? participant? user? or ...?) seems most appropriate for the actions you take as you move through the texts? What name best describes the actions taken by the text's maker to put these pieces together? Why do you choose these names? Do you give yourself different names for different kinds of or differently designed texts?

ANALYSIS leading to COMPOSITION

- 1 Sketch out several versions of a website that informs about something of interest to you. Design a version for children, for a college-level audience, for people who are blind, for an audience that does not have native fluency with your language. What different visual strategies do you use in the different versions? Why?
- 2 Look closely at a textbook or piece of educational software you hate or that you think gets in the way of you learning what the book is supposed to teach (grammar and thermodynamics texts are often helpful choices). Try sketching out a redesign of the text so that the visual presentation of the text better supports your learning. What typefaces or kinds of illustrations or size of page or kinds of headings will make the text seem more inviting and encouraging to you? Use any visual strategies you know to redesign the text, and then defend your choices.
- 3 Choose a paper you have written for a class. Justify every visual design decision: describe why you chose the size and color of paper, why you used the typefaces and typeface sizes and styles you did, why you indicated paragraphs as you did, why you put the page numbers where they are, how you chose the margin size, and so on.
Redesign the paper so that your choices of visual strategy are inseparable from the overall arguments and intentions of your paper. (It might help you if you imagine you are redesigning this paper for a different audience; imagine a popular magazine where this composition might appear.) In addition to considering typefaces, margins, paper size, how paragraphs are indicated, and so on, consider whether some of your concepts or arguments might be better presented in drawings or photographs.
- 4 Pick any one-page design you see around you, and redesign it so that its visual presentation encourages its audience toward generosity or slow and careful thinking or intellectual playfulness or somber reflection or...

NOTES

- ¹ MOOs and MUDs are interactive, text-based applications in which users 'talk' with each other online, over networks, as they move onscreen within and between common rooms and spaces that have been designed to encourage interaction. MOOs have been widely used in writing (and other) classrooms; to learn more, see Haynes and Holmevik.

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